

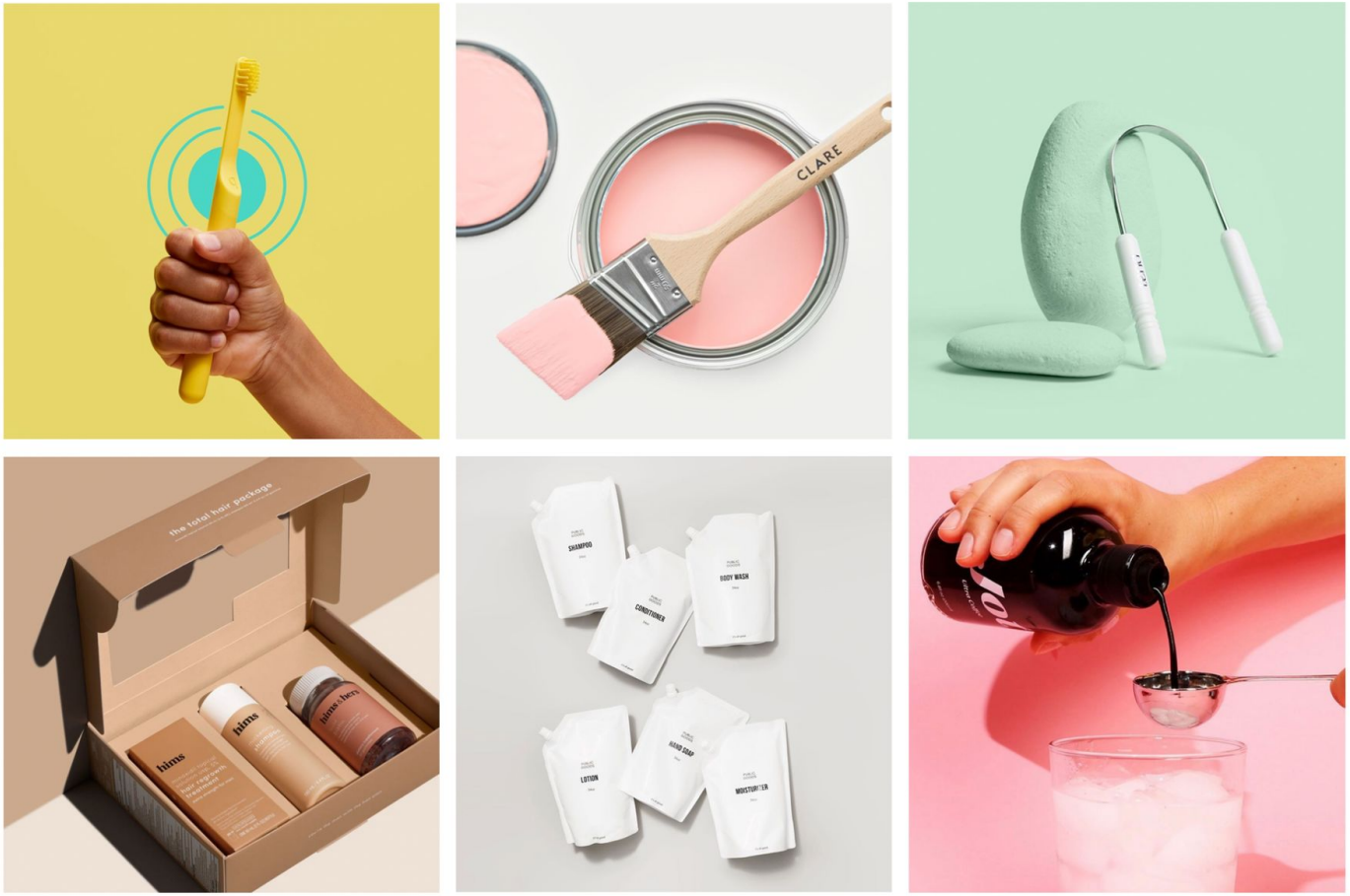
Technology & Ideas

Welcome to Your Bland New World

Why do disruptive startups slavishly follow an identikit formula of business model, look and feel, and tone of voice? Because it works, sort of.

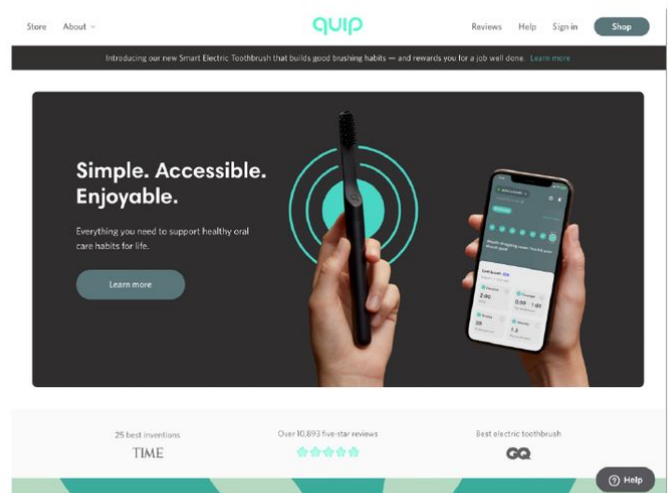
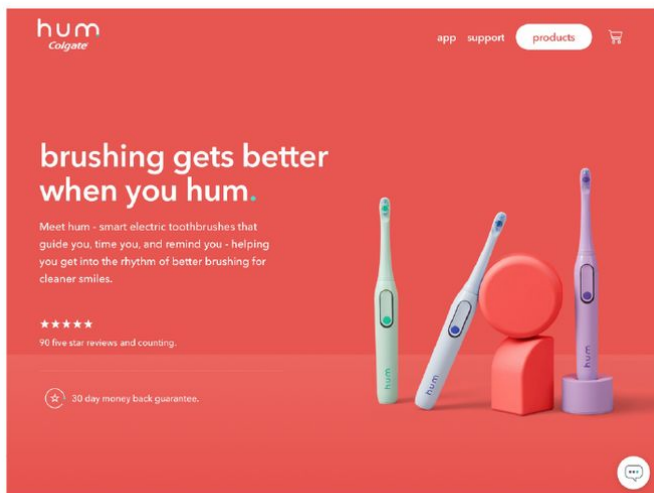
By [Ben Schott](#) [+Follow](#)

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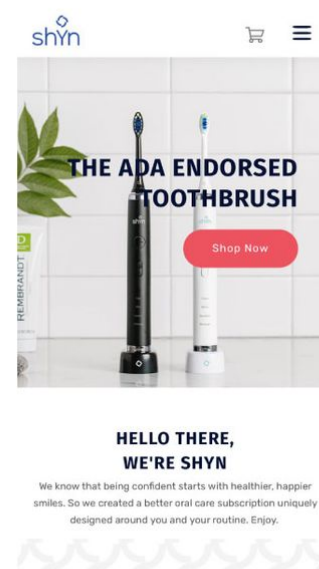
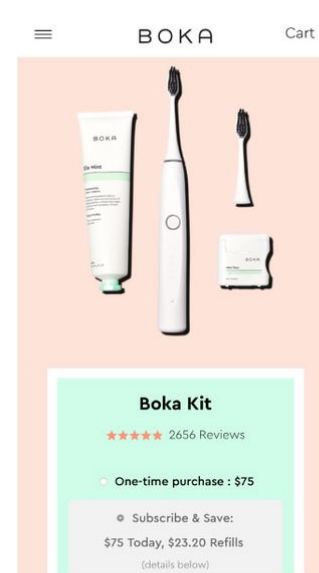
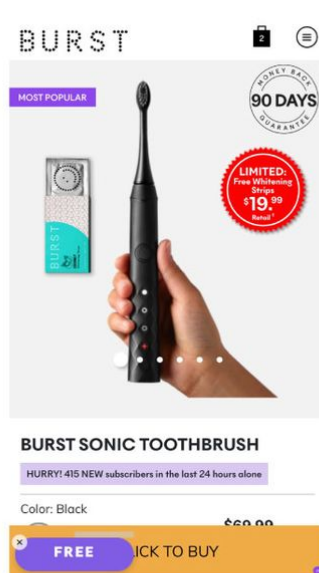
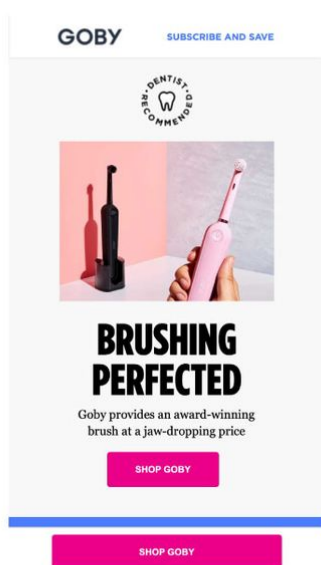


Meet the blands... Clockwise from top left: Quip (@quip); Clare (@clarepaints); Tend (@hello_tend); Jot (@jot); Public Goods (@publicgoods); Hims (@hims) via Instagram

A week or so ago Colgate unveiled Hum – a smart toothbrush that “guides consumers to brush better and to build healthier habits without sacrificing fun for functionality.” Hum doesn’t look or feel like Colgate’s other toothbrushes ... but it does rather resemble Quip.



Quip is equally flattered by Goby, Burst, Boka, Brüush, Gleem and Shyn.



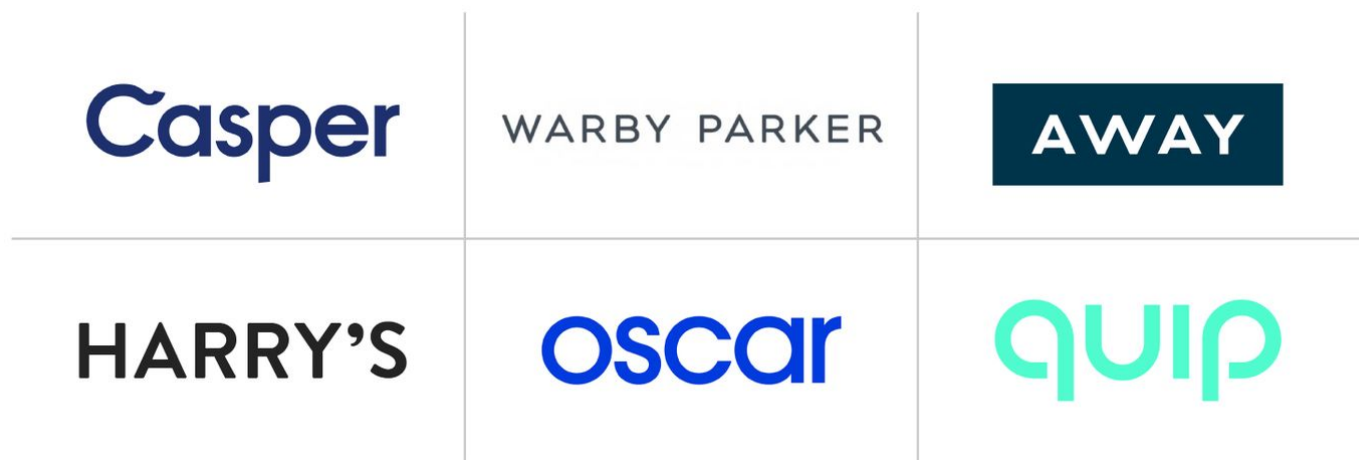
For those not tracking the intricacies of zeitgeist marketing, Hum vs. Quip is just the latest corporate skirmish in a wider consumer war: brand vs. bland.

What are blands?

All startups seek to disrupt and disintermediate a smug status quo, or originate and dominate an entirely new niche. But what makes a brand a *bland* is duality: claiming simultaneously to be

unique in product, groundbreaking in purpose, and singular in delivery, while slavishly obeying an identikit formula of business model, look and feel, and tone of voice.

Despite hiding in plain sight (and plain recycled packaging), this “slight of bland” has won the wallets of a generation that considers itself above marketing, and created some of the buzziest companies of the age.



The Blanding Blueprint

Blands are D2C • The target of bland disruption is The Man – who has had it too good for too long at your expense:

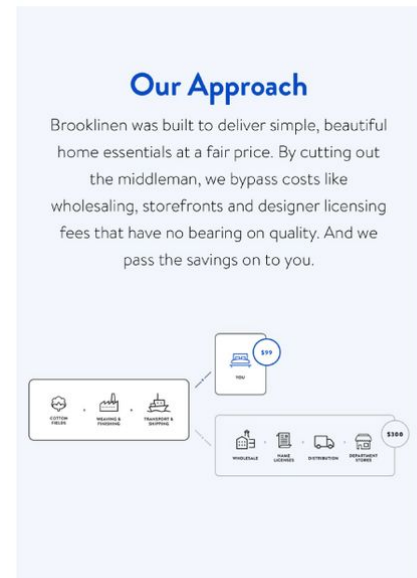
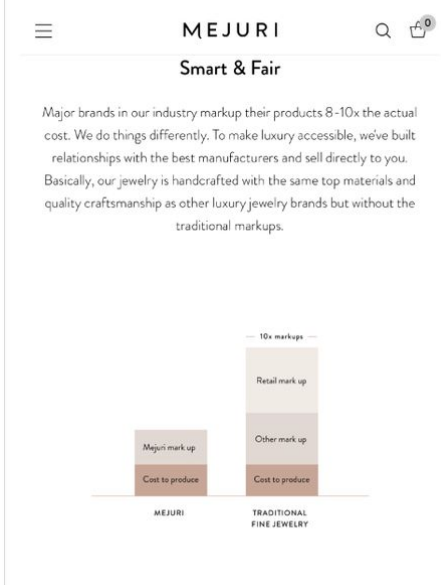
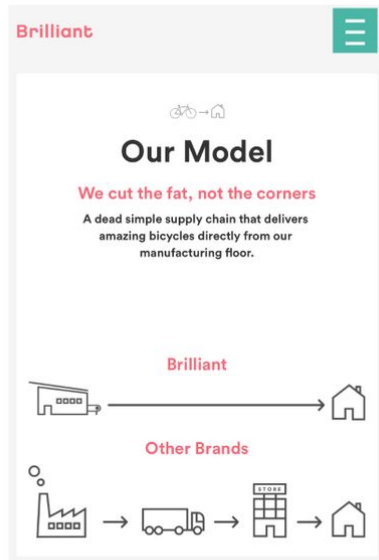
Hubble: “In the US and Canada, four manufacturers control about 95% of the contact lens market. Without much competition, they’ve set prices to be much higher than they should.”

Misen: “Most kitchen tools are either cheap and flimsy, or come burdened with bloated price tags and unexplained features. That didn’t seem right to us, so we took a simpler approach.”

Native: “The personal care industry has been lazy in making sure its products are safe, and we’re not having it!”

Beltology: “For too long belts have been overlooked, underloved, and poorly made. We say no more!”

Blands promise to end this inequity by cutting out the middle man:



If there's a sense that VC-backed blands target the woes of VC-bros, it's because many do. As Chamath Palihapitiya noted:

“The VC community is an increasingly predictable and lookalike bunch that just seems to follow each other around from one trivial idea to another.”

This may explain the blands clustering around, for instance, hipster baby gear (Bloom, Lalo, Bumbleride), personalized supplements (Baze, Thyrvé, Care/of), and valet parking (Oobeo, Luxe, SpotHero). And it certainly explains the blands that help other blands with funding (Expa), accounting (Bench), retail (Leap), returns (Loop), consumer insights (Perksy) and “high-volume hiring for the hourly workforce” (Fountain).

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To be fair, some blands do pioneer genuine social change: Imperfect Foods tackles food waste by selling ugly, off-spec and undervalued produce; Binti has helped over 12,000 families to foster or adopt; Ava allows 400 million deaf and hard-of-hearing people to have accessible in-person conversations; and DNANudge has recently adapted the technology it developed for genetically bespoke shopping recommendations to provide rapid, lab-free tests for Covid-19. But such benignancy is often lost in the buzz of blands trading sneakers (StockX, Goat, Sole Supremacy) and selling CBD-infused sodas (Bimble, Sprig, Dram).

Blands are underdogs • Although funded by angel investment, venture capital and private equity, blands present as scrappily un-corporate:

“We didn’t create Oscar because we liked health insurance. Quite the opposite.”

“Monica + Andy wasn’t born in a boardroom. It was born in a delivery room ... ”

And, like the disciples of Brian of Nazareth, blands are all individuals:

“We created Harry’s to be different from other shaving companies.”

Burrow: “We’re not a normal furniture company”

Solé: “Not your ordinary bicycle company.”

Flora Vere: “We’re Different, *Just Like You* ...”

Blands need a narrative • Rarely do blands declare: “We were founded to exploit a niche and leverage venture capital until the target of our disruption buys us out.” Instead they proffer origin stories that mash up indie-movie “meet cutes” with aspirational “grail quests”:

Candid: “Once upon a time, five of us started talking about our teeth ...”

Keeps: “Steve and Demetri met the first week of college, back when they both had very full heads of hair.”

Allbirds: “A native of New Zealand, Tim Brown was always well versed in the magical qualities of merino wool.”

Central to many bland narratives is personal exasperation with the existing options:

“We built GLEEM because we weren’t satisfied with the toothbrushes available in the market.”

Koio: “It’s not every day that you deviate from the script and risk it all. But that’s exactly what we did when we realized we were both looking for high-end, well crafted sneakers ...”

Blands are humble • Blands pledge to do one thing well (at least initially) and, in so doing, they present as a calm oasis amidst the chaos of commerce:

Rumpl was put on this planet to introduce the world to better blankets.”

Feetures: “We changed the rules on how socks work.”

IPSY was founded on a singular mission: to inspire individuals around the world to express their unique beauty.”

No matter how complex the product, blands offer one-click solutions and simulacrum of customization:

Clare: “Take our two-minute quiz to get a personalized paint color recommendation for your space.”

Abra: “Download the app and start investing in crypto within minutes.”

Of course, it’s never enough simply to flog frozen meals or mail-order specs; blands must improve the world *and* empower self-fulfillment:

Mosaic is about more than creating healthy, great-tasting food – we’re on a mission to build a more responsible and healthy food system”

Liingo: “It’s about much more than finding a great pair of glasses. It’s about self-expression. It’s about how you present yourself to the world. It’s about crafting your voice and telling your story.”

Blands have values • Bland values are simple and uniform: The customer “comes first” (obvs), with the environment and community close behind. Because of this – and because there’s absolutely “no judgement” about sex, gender, race, ethnicity, age, faith, looks, or ability – blands appear to lean politically liberal, albeit from within the ideologically timid DMZ of consumer capitalism.

True, there is a libertarian edge to some fintech and security blands, but these are the exception. Indeed, in 2016, after 145 technology leaders wrote an open letter condemning Donald Trump's presidential ambitions, BuzzFeed reported that Josh Kushner – venture capitalist, co-founder of health insurance bland Oscar and brother of Jared – felt obliged to clarify his politics: “Josh is a lifelong Democrat, but has remained silent during the election out of respect for his brother.”

Blanding's liberalism is usefully contextualized by the controversial Minnesotan bedding firm MyPillow. In many ways, MyPillow is very on bland: It has an inspiring origin story for a simple product marketed directly (and aggressively) to consumers. However, two facets mark MyPillow as a proudly unreconstructed brand. First, the company's decidedly off-bland look and feel:

The screenshot shows the MyPillow website homepage. At the top is a navigation bar with the MyPillow logo and links to various product categories: MYPILLOWS, PILLOWCASES, BED SHEETS, MATTRESS TOPPER, TOWELS, ROLL & GO ANYWHERE PILLOW, DOG BEDS, BODY PILLOW, OTHER PRODUCTS, MIKE'S BOOK, and MYSTORE PRODUCTS. Below the navigation bar is a banner for "FINANCING AVAILABLE On All Orders Over \$200.00". The main content area features a large central image of a man holding a pillow, with the text "Guaranteed The Most Comfortable Pillow You'll Ever Own!®". To the right of this image is a promotion for "Buy One Get One Free! Premium MyPillows \$69.98 w/ promo code" with a "CLICK HERE" button. Below the central image are three smaller promotional boxes: "Save 30% w/ promo code 3" Mattress Topper Starting at \$199.49" with a "CLICK HERE" button; "Giza Dreams Sheets 2 For 1 Low Price & Free Shipping! w/ promo code" with a "CLICK HERE" button; and "Mike's New Memoir BUY NOW! and get a \$25.00 Gift Card!" with a "CLICK HERE" button. Below each of these three boxes is a caption: "Mattress Topper Special", "Luxury Giza Cotton Sheets", and "Mike's Memoir".

And second, the off-bland politics of the company's founder and CEO, Mike Lindell, who in 2019 said that Donald Trump had been "chosen by God," and in 2020, during a White House pandemic press conference, urged Americans to return to the Bible. Such defiantly unbland politics help illustrate the ideological uniformity of blands for whom such statements would be instantly immolating.

The commercial imperative of on-bland values explains why so many blands are B Corporations (itself something of a bland):

Continued



“Certified B Corporations are a new kind of business that balances purpose and profit. They are legally required to consider the impact of their decisions on their workers, customers, suppliers, community, and the environment.”

Of these values, the environment is the hardest circle to square, since even the greenest blands are hell-bent on growth. If the best thing an individual can do for the planet is have fewer children, then surely the genuinely eco-entrepreneur might wonder whether the world really needs a Wi-Fi controlled smart oven (June), or a Bluetooth-enabled coffee mug (Ember).

Blands are aspirational • The one liberal value blands tend to elide is inequality, because while blands are, by definition, not opulent, neither are they bargain-basement. For the rich, blands

are an ironic normcore trifle; for the aspiring middle, blands offer a fleeting facsimile of prosperity; and for the poor, blands are either the products they make, or the services they provide.

Many blands work hard to position themselves as “affordable luxuries” – the kind of treat that millennials might afford but for their avocado toast fixation. Others personify what Venkatesh Rao termed premium mediocre:

“A pattern of consumption that publicly signals upward mobile aspirations, with consciously insincere pretensions to refined taste, while navigating the realities of inexorable downward mobility with sincere anxiety.”

Rao’s examples of premium mediocrity (the finest wine at Olive Garden, extra leg-room in economy, food that Instagrams better than it tastes) echo the blands that trumpet domestic design while manufacturing offshore:

Away : “Our products are designed at our HQ in New York City and manufactured across Asia (in China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Cambodia) ...”

Interior Define • “We design everything from our headquarters in Chicago, and produce with our dedicated team of experts in China ... ”

Many blands attempt to coax users into memberships and subscriptions – using the language of community and convenience to create long-term commitments to traditionally fleeting purchases. In addition to the explosion of blands offering toothbrush and meal-kit subscriptions, one can sign up to monthly deliveries of everything from baby food (Yumi), coffee (Bean Box) and snacks (Graze) to perfume (Scentbird), vitamins (Ritual) and soup (Good Stock). Often these are not cheap: The Sill’s best-selling “Medium Plants for Beginners” subscription (“made for a new plant parent that wants to bring the outdoors in but isn’t sure where to start”) is \$60 a month.

Every now and then blands get it emblematically wrong. Juicero was laughed into extinction when Bloomberg demonstrated that its \$399 Wi-Fi-enabled juicer squeezed the essence from its \$7 sachets of fruit pulp no better than the human hand. And the vending machine startup Bodega was heckled into submission by those outraged at the idea of “disrupting” hardscrabble mom-and-pop stores while simultaneously appropriating their name. Such misfires illustrate blanding’s tendency to tin-eared exuberance and even arrogance. Both Juicero and Bodega were well funded (\$134 million and \$2.5 million respectively), but in neither case did the cool-cat

founders or wise-owl backers spot the blindingly obvious elephant. Sometimes, of course, the elephant is the product: in 2014, Washboard proposed mailing laundromat users \$10 of quarters for \$14.99 – a bland proposition that was, at least, transparent.

Blands are bland • Because they target consumers allergic to marketing, blands strive tirelessly to be engagingly unobtrusive and convincingly inevitable. As David Mamet wrote in “House of Games”:

“It’s called a confidence game. Why? Because you give me your confidence? No. Because I give you mine.”

To achieve this goal, blands rely on a set of aesthetic conventions every bit as rigid as their liberal values.

Consider, for instance, bland names. Although blands employ the panoply of traditional naming techniques (Brilliant Bikes, Dollar Shave Club), various naming tropes emerge again and again:

Characters: Either calculatedly generic (Judy, Floyd, Henry, Billie, Maude) or studiously cool (Warby Parker derives from two Jack Kerouac characters)

Portmanteaus: Hungryroot, Baublebar, Tracksmith, Trubrain, Classpass, Platejoy

Color+Noun: Blue Apron, Black Milk, Purple Carrot, Green Chef

Monoliths: Public Goods, Ministry of Supply, Primary Goods, Modern Citizen

Vowellessness: RMDY, MVMT, DSTLD, HVMN, TRNK, MNDFL

Ampersands: Tuft & Needle, Frank & Oak, Hook & Albert, Loom & Leaf

Quirk: Lemonade insurance, Kangaroo home security

And, just as toilet rental companies cluster around lavatorial humor (A Royal Flush, Callahead, Rent a Throne, Head Quarters), so blands have a fascination with metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. This gives us: storage by Clutter; efficiency by Slack; food delivery by Caviar; Burrow furniture; Parachute bedding; luggage from Away; and spin classes by Flywheel, Peloton, Swerve, Ryde and Cyc.

Creating a truly bland tone of voice is a high-wire act – too bland and it’s dull; not bland enough and it jars like dad-dancing. The copywriting tightrope seems to be:

affable – but not overbearing

upbeat – but not unrealistic

casual – but not careless

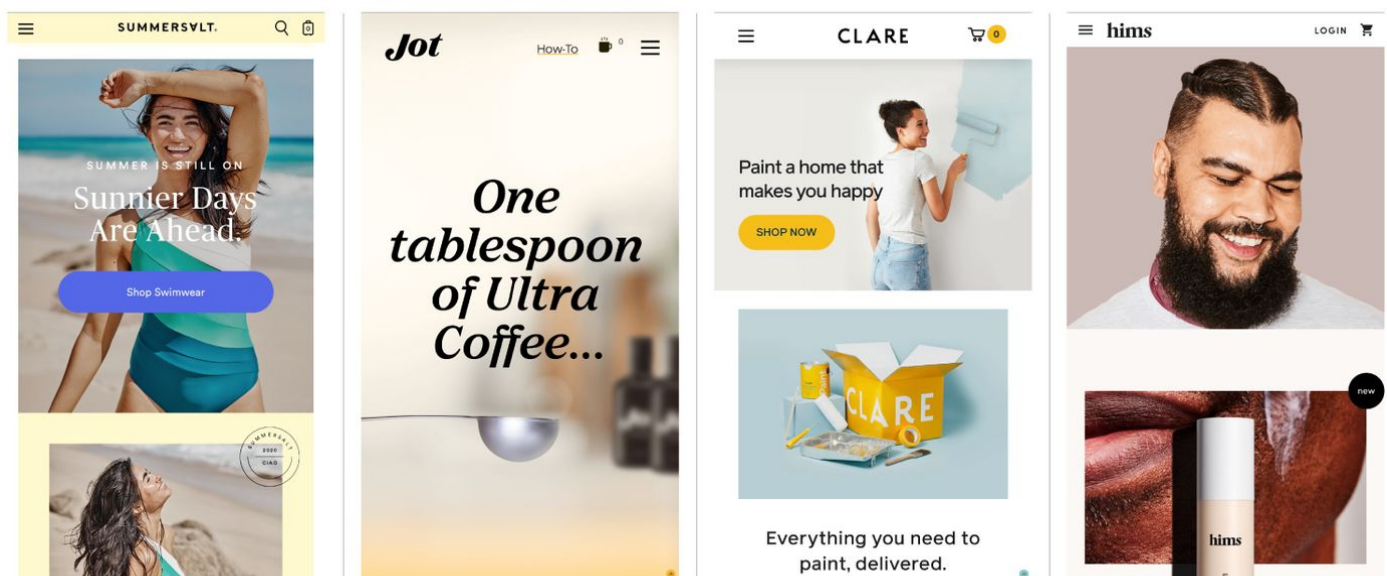
pure – but not pious

cheeky – but not annoying

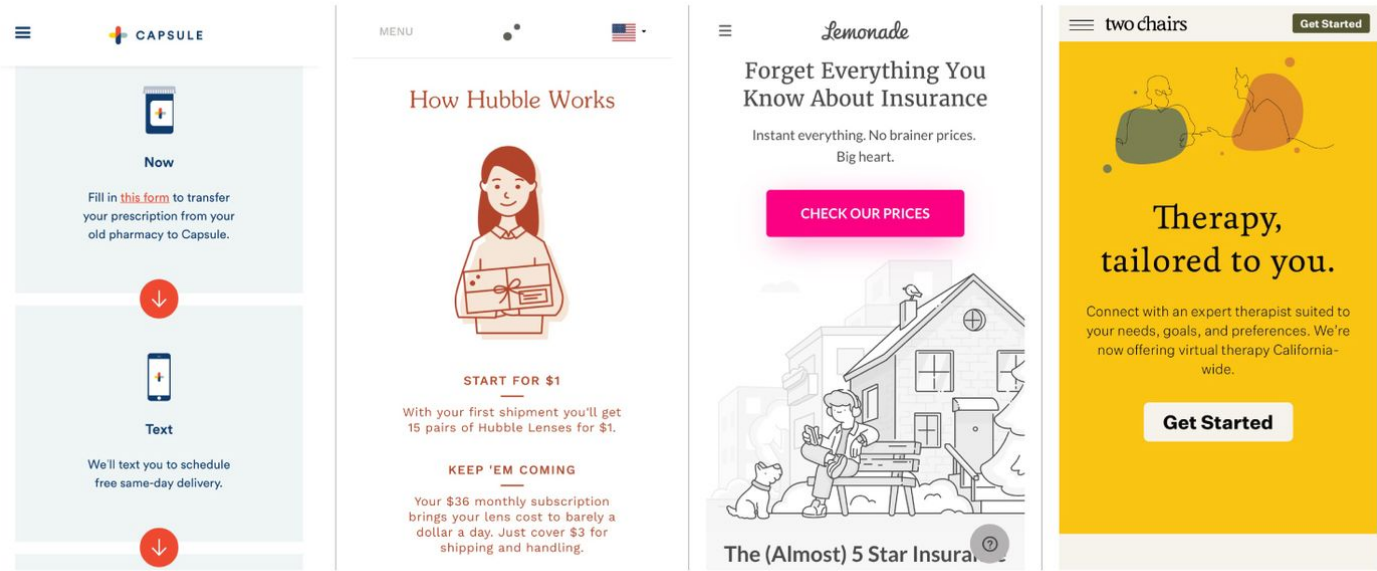
sincere – but not earnest

As a result, certain bland catchphrases are endlessly recycled: “attention to detail,” “timeless craftsmanship,” “thoughtfully sourced,” “simple and seasonal,” “chef-crafted,” “everyday essentials,” “a membership designed around you,” “join our community,” “fits in to your busy life,” “we make it easy,” “we’re passionate about,” “we’re obsessed with,” “we never settle,” “tireless dedication to quality.”

Visually, blands are simple, neutral and flat. The palette is plain and pastel (with the occasional vibrant splash); the mood is upbeat and happy, or pensive and cool, but never truly real; the dress-code is smart-casual. Bland people are stock-photo attractive (or quirkily *jolie laide*), and they run the gamut of race, ethnicity and age – intermingled wherever possible. Although many blands (from fashion to femtech) target women directly, even those that don’t tend to skew feminine or nonbinary. Many mainstream blands would likely embrace the pronouns “they/them/their.”



Complex products and technical processes are illustrated by cute cartoons or Noun Project icons:



Bland logos are confident but cute, utilizing an array of tweaks and twists to provoke the all-important “smile in the mind.”

CLARE	MEJURI	WALDO	CANDID
SUMMERSALT	RECLINER	MOLEKULE	EVERLANE
hims	fur	Jot	Winc
PARACHUTE	SUNSCOOP	PEACHY	LOLA
MIRROR	FITPLAN	HUBBLE	v's'ble
small door	two chairs	tend	alma

Blands are ineluctable • Despite embodying the vanguard of consumer capitalism, blands tend to be subtly Soviet – quasi-post-apocalyptic. Even within a saturated market, every bland’s message is somehow a post-choice, totalitarian inevitability:

There is only one mattress ...

There is only one razor ...

There is only one chef-inspired human-grade subscription-service dog food ...

(There are, in fact, many: Ollie, The Farmer’s Dog, NomNomNow, PetPlate, Butternut Box, Spot & Tango, Grocery Pup, Cali Raw, Lucky Dog – to name just a few.)

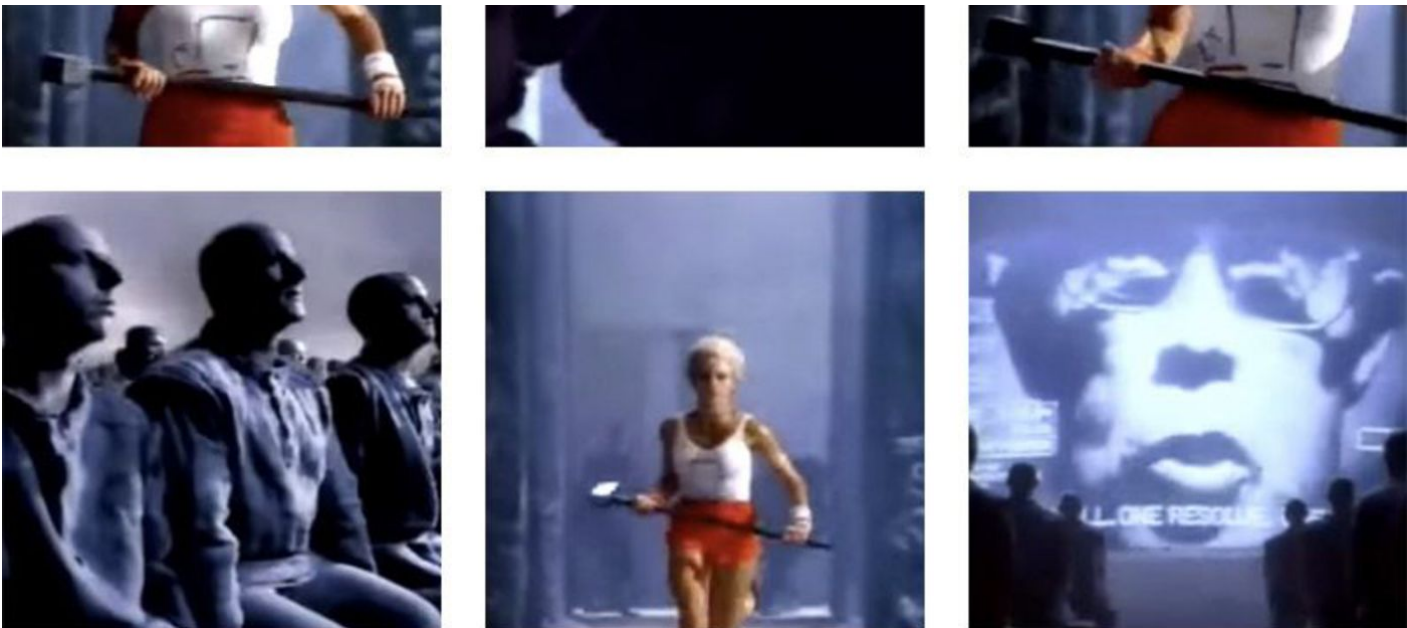
Like buying organic, or going vegan, each bland implies the next – it would be hypocritical to spread old-school FMCG Crest on your subscription Goby toothbrush, when you *could* be using “brush happy” “charcoal and matcha” from the “strangely likeable toothpaste” bland Hello (“Things just got minteresting!”).

Consequently, *Homo blandus* must be a Swiss Army knife of interlocking blands: awaking on a Casper, throwing back the Brooklinen, reaching for the Warbys, chugging a Soylent, logging onto Slack, Grubhubbing a Sweetgreen ... and so on.

Blands <3 Apple • Despite being the brand to which blands aspire (“Monos is the Apple of suitcases”), Apple has too long and complex a history to be a bland itself. For 44 years, Apple has painstakingly concealed code (from WYSIWYG desktop to voice activation) and stripped back design (from logo shadow to headphone jacks) until its entire proposition is encapsulated in a crisp silhouette glowing from a gleaming screen. Blands that want nothing more than to be icons on your iPhone simply set off at the point of Apple’s arrival.

Apple was, however, a scrappy consumer-focused startup – and the Macintosh (“The computer for the rest of us”) was designed to disrupt International Business Machines Corp. In 1984, Apple threw down the gauntlet with a Super Bowl spot that equated the hegemony of Big Blue with the horror of Big Brother.



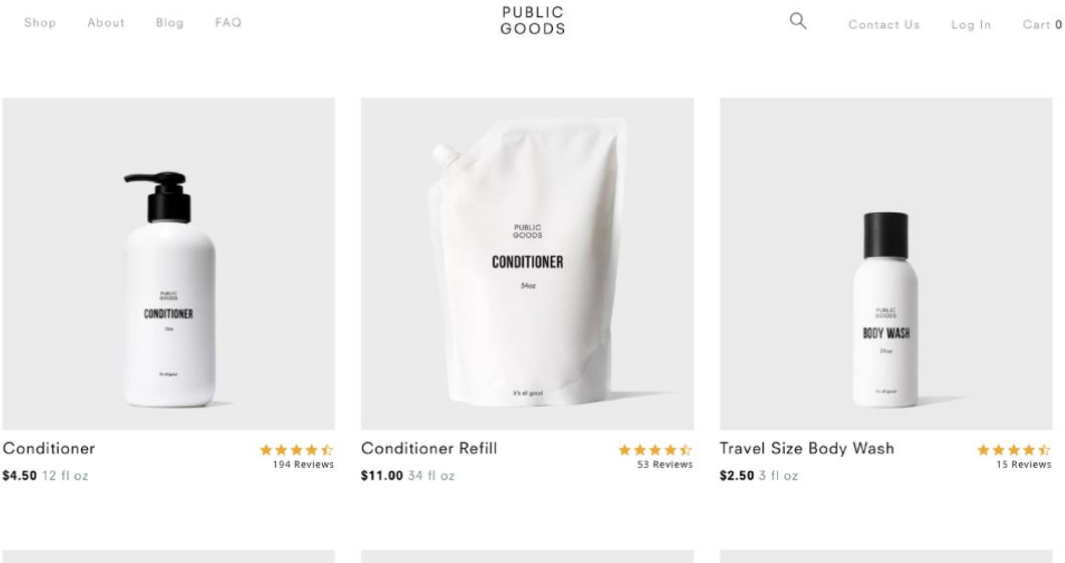


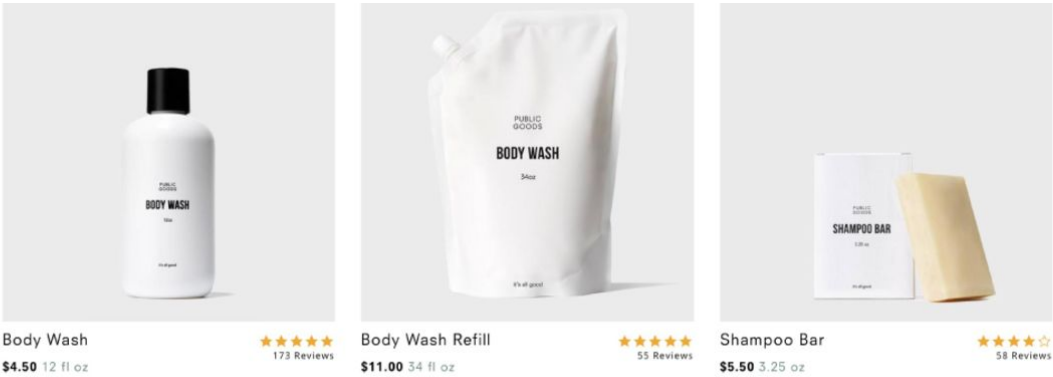
Screenshots from Apple's 1984 Super Bowl advertisement.

It’s hard not to imagine George Orwell hating this ad as much as he’d be horrified by Apple’s cultural dominance, surveillance capabilities and \$2 trillion market cap. However, he’d surely be fascinated by the parallels between the vast array of Apple-inspired blands and the products of “Nineteen Eighty-Four” – in which the Ministry of Plenty rations everything from Victory Coffee to Victory Cigarettes in bland, unadorned packs:

“He took down from the shelf a bottle of colourless liquid with a plain white label marked VICTORY GIN. It gave off a sickly, oily smell, as of Chinese rice-spirit. Winston poured out nearly a teacupful, nerved himself for a shock, and gulped it down like a dose of medicine.”

Ring any bells?





Blands are in it to exit • Rather than settling in for the long-haul, most bland founders aspire to accelerate customer acquisition to launch velocity before spinning off an IPO or seeking acquisition from a competing bland (Uber + Postmates), a complementary business (Lululemon + Mirror), or a victim of their original disruption (Petsmart + Chewy). As Casper’s January IPO filing revealed, scale is all: in 2018 the company lost \$92.1 million on revenue of \$358 million, spending \$126 million on sales and marketing and, according to one calculation, losing \$160 on every mattress it sold.

While there is nothing disreputable in blitzscaling for an exit, it does rather undermine the David vs. Goliath bland narrative. Hence, exits (aspired or achieved) are seldom mentioned on bland websites, even as they are a key feature on the sites of the firms that fund them.

TVP TRIBECA VENTURE PARTNERS					
About People Portfolio TVP Labs					
EXITED	EXITED	EXITED	EXITED	EXITED	EXITED
EXITED	EXITED	EXITED	EXITED	EXITED	EXITED

Speaking of exits reminds one of the latest twist in Megxit, which illustrates how branding has escaped the lab of consumer capitalism and entered the social mainstream.

In June 2019, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex applied to trademark Sussex Royal in six business classes spanning clothing, campaigning and social care. In February 2020, after reports that the Queen objected to the regal suffix, Harry and Meghan withdrew their application and, in April, applied to register Archewell – a neologism that references their son, Archie, and lays claim to profundity:

“Archewell is a name that combines an ancient word for strength and action, and another that evokes the deep resources we each must draw upon.”

Wittingly or not, the sixth in line to the throne had just launched a bland.

Sussex Royal – with its whiff of potatoes and echoes of Prince Charles’s Duchy Originals – is the quintessential old-school brand. By contrast, Archewell – with its blank-canvas name and direct-to-consumer mission – is a bland *par excellence*.

The consumers of Archewell’s mission? We, the plebeians.

The target of Archewell’s disruption? The British royal family, which for years has called itself “The Firm.”

Watch this space for the Queen’s response:

WNDZR - *Empowering commoners via sustainable Bluetooth sovereignty.*

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